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THE SOCIAL, INDUSTRIAL, AND POLITICAL LIFE OF ISRAEL BETWEEN 950 B. C. AND 621 B. C.

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The age of Solomon a turning point.—Israel had become an agricultural people;—yet retained many nomadic characteristics.—Now began to be a commercial people;—and through growth of cities an industrial people.—Changes introduced in tribal organization.

THE reign of Solomon (about 977–937 B. C.) is a turning point in the social and economic life of Israel. It marks the conclusion of the process by which Israel was transformed from a pastoral to an agricultural people and the beginning of the process by which it became an industrial and commercial people. Let us look first at the stage of social development which Israel had already attained about the year 950 B. C. and then at its further evolution in the subsequent period.

By the time of Solomon pastoral life seems to have disappeared from the land west of the Jordan. Slowly but surely Israel had become a community of farmers. The old Bedawi ideal of possessing “a land flowing with milk and honey” had given place to the new ideal of “sitting every man under his vine and under his fig tree” (1 Kings 4:25).

This transition could not but bring with it great changes in food, clothing, habitation, and communal life. The operation of changed economic conditions in producing social distinctions was manifest in Israel soon after the entrance into Canaan. Even the Book of the Covenant knows already a “social problem” arising out of unequal distribution of land and the existence of a landless proletariat.

Still, although agriculture brought with it modifications in the constitution of Israel, it would be a mistake to suppose that nomadic peculiarities had wholly disappeared even by the time of

the kings. On the contrary, Israel, with that conservatism which is characteristic of the Semites, retained far more of its ancient ways than it lost. Down to the exile the Hebrew preferred breeding cattle to tilling the soil. Nabal, with his three thousand sheep and one thousand goats (1 Sam., chap. 25), may be regarded as a type of the prosperous farmer at the beginning of the period of the kings, who, although he cultivated his fields, devoted most of his attention to his flocks.

In spite of the disturbances which settled life had brought into society, much of the primitive simplicity of manners still remained. The rich and distinguished landowner guarded his sheep and cultivated his fields like his poorest neighbor. The houses of the common people were little better than the tents of the desert. They were mere huts of sun-dried bricks, containing at best only two rooms, and furnished with the utmost simplicity. The rich lived in somewhat larger habitations of stone, whose damp and gloomy interiors were but a slight improvement upon the ancient cave dwellings of Canaan after which they were originally modeled. Barley cakes and milk were the ordinary diet of all classes. Meat was eaten only on the rare occasions of national or family feasts.

Industry had developed scarcely at all beyond the point that it had reached in the desert. Smiths and potters were the only artisans known to ancient Israel. All the other arts were still domestic. Whatever the ancient Hebrew desired that he could not make he was content to purchase from Canaanite or Phœnician peddlers. So exclusively was trade in the hands of these foreigners that "Canaanite" and "traveler" came to be the standing Hebrew designations of a merchant.

The adoption of an agricultural life brought little or no change in the constitution of the family or household. Members of the same clans also settled in the same districts, so that the elders still maintained their ancient functions of judges and military leaders, only now they became "elders of the city" instead of "elders of the clan." The old tribal consciousness was still unbroken. There never was any national unity during the period of the judges, and even after the kingdom had been

founded, tribal interests and jealousies were stronger than the ideal of a united Israel.

Such in broad outline was the social condition of Israel at the beginning of the period of the kings. It remains now to inquire what changes were effected by the establishment of monarchy.

Israel did not become a predominatingly commercial people until after the exile, but the beginning of the transition from an agricultural to an industrial life is seen as early as Solomon. In the days of Shamgar the son of Anath, and in the days of Jael when "the highways were unoccupied, the travelers walked through byways and the rulers ceased in Israel" (*Judges 5:6*); there was no opportunity for traffic beyond the simplest barter of commodities. Monarchy, in spite of all its shortcomings, was a source of peace and order in Israel, and is so estimated by the author of *Judges*, when he says that every man did that which was right in his own eyes when there was no king in Israel (*Judges 21:25*).

Particularly under Solomon the advantage of stable government began to manifest itself in a better distribution of commodities. A brisk internal trade in agricultural produce was now possible, and for the first time Israel obtained a foreign market. With the Tyrians Solomon concluded a commercial treaty, by which he obtained cedar and fir wood from Lebanon for his architectural enterprises, giving in exchange wheat and olive oil (*1 Kings. 5:1-12*). The commerce thus auspiciously begun lasted through the entire period of the kings (*Amos 1:9*). Ahab promoted it by his marriage with Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal, king of Zidon (*1 Kings 16:31*). An interesting list of the wares in which Tyre dealt, and which she was glad to exchange for the agricultural products of the land of Israel, is found in *Ezek.*, chap. 27.

With Egypt also Solomon entered into commercial relations and confirmed these by marrying one of Pharaoh's daughters (*1 Kings 3:1*). Horses and chariots are expressly mentioned as brought up (*1 Kings 10:28*) and doubtless many other artistic and industrial products were imported at the same time. In return

the Hebrews exported storax, mastic, and ladanum from the region east of the Jordan (Gen. 37:25), also honey, spices, myrrh, pistachio nuts, and almonds from the land west of the Jordan (Gen. 43:11).

Commerce with the Syrians had already begun under David in consequence of the subjugation of several of the Aramaean and Hittite kingdoms. The choice products which these nations rendered as tribute (2 Sam., chap. 8) probably came to Israel also by the avenues of trade. This traffic grew to still greater proportions in the later days of the kingdom. Ahab obtained from Ben-Hadad the right to establish bazaars in Damascus (1 Kings 20:34), an interesting incidental evidence of the business enterprise of that period. Things had gone so far in the time of Hosea that he had occasion to lament, "Jacob is become a Canaanite (*i.e.*, merchant), the balances of deceit are in his hand: he loveth to oppress" (Hosea 12:7).

The new expansion of trade in the time of Solomon brought with it a rapid increase of wealth. The riches of Solomon became proverbial (1 Kings 3:13) and, although it may be something of an exaggeration when it is said that "he made silver to be as stones in Jerusalem and cedars made he to be as the sycamores which are in the lowland for abundance" (1 Kings 10:27), this statement bears witness to an extraordinary increase of material prosperity. Not only the king prospered by traffic, but his officials and courtiers were equally successful. An aristocracy of wealth suddenly appeared in the place of the old tribal aristocracy.

The newly acquired riches, instead of benefiting the nation by being wisely invested as capital, were squandered in self-indulgence. Solomon himself was the leader in this wicked and uneconomic policy. The story of his reign in the Book of Kings is little more than an exhibition of his lavish, senseless luxury. Saul had been content to spend his life on his ancestral estate at Gibeah. David, although a mighty conqueror, still lived a simple, unassuming life, but Solomon affected all the splendor of a genuine oriental despot.

His example found willing imitators in the new plutocracy,

and the taste for luxury, having once been implanted, could never be eradicated. Even the division of the kingdom put no check upon it. Israel, as the larger and more prosperous nation, degenerated more rapidly. In the time of Amos the aristocrats would have blushed at the simplicity of Solomon's way of living. They dwelt in palaces of ivory and had both their summer and their winter houses. They reposed at their banquets upon damask cushions upon couches of ivory, and ate selected lambs and fatted calves. They drank their beakers of wine, and sang improvised songs to the accompaniment of their musical instruments (*Amos 3:12, 15.; 6:4 f.*).

The effect of luxury upon Israel, as upon every other nation, was to beget a desire for greater luxury. Money must be had at any cost to keep up with the pace of the times. If it could not be gained by fair means, then it must be by foul means. Solomon himself found his revenues insufficient to pay for his extravagant undertakings, and was obliged to resort to unjust and burdensome levies. His officials and the country nobility made use of still more questionable methods. Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah give a vivid picture of the oppression of the masses by the wealthy men of Israel. They made "corners" in grain, so as to sell a smaller quantity for a larger price (*Amos 8:5*). They lent money at exorbitant rates, and when the debtor was unable to pay they enslaved him for a debt no greater than the cost of a pair of sandals (*Amos 2:6-8; cf. Hosea 4:1 f.; 6:6-10; 10:12; Isa. 3:14 f.; 5:7, 8, 22 f.*).

The inevitable result of this process in Israel, as in other declining civilizations, was the accumulation of all the wealth in the hands of a few. In consequence of land-grabbing and eviction of debtors the peasant proprietor of ancient times had well-nigh disappeared and all the real estate had been absorbed by the great landowners, until, as Isaiah bitterly remarks, they had come to "dwell alone in the midst of the land" (5:8). To the disappearance of the sturdy, freedom-loving yeoman of an earlier date, and the rise of a race of serfs was due more than to any other cause the fall of both the Hebrew kingdoms.

A second modification that monarchy introduced into the

social organization of Israel was life in large cities. The first settlers of Canaan could not conquer many of the walled towns and those which they were able to capture they were unable to use. During the period of the judges the Hebrews lived in small villages, like the German *Dörfer*, from which the farmers went out to cultivate their fields. In process of time these were protected by walls, or by a simple tower, into which the inhabitants might retire in case of attack. They then received the name of "cities," but they had none of the division of functions characteristic of genuine civic life. With the conquest of the remaining Canaanite strongholds in the reigns of David and of Solomon, and the absorption of large bodies of the ancient inhabitants of the land, a change took place. True Hebrew cities now began to appear.

City life promoted the growth of new industries. Phoenician artisans, such as Solomon hired for his architectural undertakings, spread a knowledge of the mechanical arts. The wealthy desired finer habitations and better clothing than they and their slaves could produce. Gradually, as a result of all these factors, there grew up an industrial class in Israel. Whereas in the time of Solomon all skilled labor had to be imported, in the reigns of the later kings we find in all the leading cities a developed native industry. The old bronzesmiths now became skilled workers in iron and other metals. The potters attempted finer and more artistic products. Goldsmiths, silversmiths, and engravers of gems attained proficiency in their crafts. Carpenters, stonecutters, masons, bakers, weavers, fullers, barbers, and perfumers are also mentioned.

City life brought many material advantages, and was not without influence in modifying the primitive ferocity of the Hebrew character; still, on the whole, the change was injurious to religion and morals and so tended ultimately to the disintegration of the nation. The cities were full of Canaanite associations. The primitive inhabitants of the land formed a larger proportion of the population of the towns than of the rural districts. They continued their old practices, even after they had become nominal worshipers of Jehovah, and their example was

fatally alluring to their Hebrew neighbors. In the times of the prophets the towns were the chief centers of the sensuous worship that they condemned as practical Baal worship, while the country retained better the sterner and purer early religion of Israel. City life, therefore, in Israel, as in so many other communities, tended to the growth of licentiousness (*cf.* Amos 2:7 f.; Hosea 4:2, 13 f.).

A third effect of monarchy was the undermining of the ancient tribal organization of Israel. This change came very slowly. At first the kings were only "judges" with a little wider jurisdiction. They owed their position to personal prowess, and trusted to the support of their tribes rather than to their constitutional authority over all Israel. The kings were compelled to make a covenant with the elders of the people before they ascended the throne, and violation of this covenant was regarded in both kingdoms as giving just ground for revolt. The old communal government under the elders remained at first unchanged, and the elders themselves served often as the lower officials of the royal government. When the Hebrew kings were strong, they were tempted like other men to abuse their power, but the worst of them were very different from the despots of the modern Orient. Custom and popular opinion put a wholesome restraint upon them even in late times. Prophets could rebuke and oppose them without fear of violence, and Ahab's inability to secure the coveted field of Naboth called forth the amazed remark of his Zidonian wife, "Dost thou now govern the kingdom of Israel?"

Still, in spite of all the limitations of monarchy, in tendency it was hostile to the tribal constitution and favorable to centralization of government. This tendency was seen conspicuously in the new military organization of Israel. The judges had possessed no regular troops, but had gathered their forces by summoning a levy of the clansmen. Saul had been obliged to content himself with the same primitive method (1 Sam. 11:7), but David began the formation of a standing army, in which not only Israelites but alien mercenaries, like the "Cretans and Philistines," were enlisted. This force was increased by the suc-

ceeding monarchs, partly for safety against foreign invaders, partly to suppress internal revolutions. The regular soldiery, being better armed and better drilled, was more than a match for the old tribal militia, and in process of time superseded it entirely. In the days of Amos soldiers were apparently no longer furnished by the tribes as such, but towns were obliged to send a quota into the field in proportion to their population (Amos 5: 3 f.). With the loss of their military function the vitality of the clans rapidly decreased. Though they might still retain their ancient names and traditions, they ceased to be political factors. Their elders lost more and more of their early significance, while the king, as the head of the standing army, gained in power and importance.

In judicial matters also the tendency of monarchy was towards centralization. The hereditary character of the king, which was recognized in both divisions of Israel, gave him a greater dignity than the judges or tribal elders had ever possessed. His sanctity as Jehovah's anointed added weight to his decision and facilitated its execution. The result was that civil and criminal cases were with increasing frequency brought before him rather than before the court of the elders, until at length judicial functions had passed very largely out of the hands of the local communes and into the control of the central government. To act as his representative in legal matters, as well as to collect his revenues, the king needed a body of officials, the "princes" as they are called. They were chosen from the family of the king or from the ranks of his favorites, and thus there gradually grew up an official aristocracy which took the place of the old tribal nobility.

While this promoted the consolidation of the kingdom, it was disastrous to the interests of justice. The old elders had been the peers of the men whom they tried, and they were amenable to the moral sense of the community, but the new judges were irresponsible aliens, who used their office merely as a means of getting rich. They come in for as large a share of the denunciations of the prophets as do the greedy plutocrats into whose hands they played. In the times of Amos and of

Isaiah it was impossible for a poor man to get his rights, for bribery was the only way of influencing the courts (*cf.* Amos 5:7, 12; 6:12; Isa. 5:22 f.). Here again is found one of the main causes of the dissolution of the Hebrew states.

Summing up this brief sketch of the effect of monarchy upon Hebrew society, we may say that, while it saved Israel from anarchy and so enabled it to hold its own longer among the nations of the earth, it let loose the evils of luxury, oppression, licentiousness, and injustice, which ultimately wrecked both kingdoms. If the moral and religious development of the nation had kept pace with its economic development, the ruin might have been averted, for there is nothing essentially destructive in social evolution. A change of economic conditions, however, is always an opportunity for degeneration, unless the national conscience is vigorous. Times of change must be times of moral progress or they will become times of deterioration.

The best men of ancient Israel saw this and preached righteousness as the only safeguard of the state from the growing evils. Prophets thundered against the abuses of their day, legislators attempted to remedy them by enactments, poets voiced the wail of the oppressed poor, Rechabites set the example of a return to the primitive simplicity of the pastoral life, out of the conflict of the "remnant" with the forces of evil came the grandest literature of antiquity; but it was all in vain; the conscience of the community refused to respond, and, because of lack of righteousness, the social, industrial, and political life of Israel in the regal period, instead of being the progress that it might have been, was a degeneration that ended in the death of both kingdoms.